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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

That the international conference which met last August at the invitation of the British Association has not thus far received mention in the News-Letter has not been due to oversight. The fact of the meeting and the outline of its proceedings you had from the newspapers ; what I wanted to say about its significance has had to wait its turn.

SCIENCE AND THE FUTURE

The importance of the meeting lay in the expression which it gave to the widespread confidence in the power of science to create a better order. One of the really big changes that has taken place during the war is the new power which scientists have acquired in the conduct of human affairs. It is recognised in all informed quarters that, if they were to cease work, the whole course of the war would be immediately changed. It is natural that they and others should feel that a contribution so obviously essential to winning the war is equally indispensable for the solution of the problems which will confront society after the war. More actively, perhaps, than any other class in the community scientists are busy planning a post-war order on scientific lines. The claim is put forward that science should be as fully organised by Governments for a world at peace as it has been for the purposes of war.

A further illustration of the public interest in the achievements of science is the reception accorded to Mr. C. H. Waddington's volume *The Scientific Attitude* in the " Pelican " series. The first large edition was quickly exhausted, and the volume has for some weeks been out of print. It may be assumed that what Mr. Waddington says expresses the mind of a large number of the younger scientists. He claims that science is " the only activity which is to-day vital and vigorous enough to lead man away from the sink of Nazism and forward along the path evolution has marked out for him." He might, if he had wished, have quoted the message of General Smuts to the meeting of the British Association that " science is the greatest torch which the spirit of man has kindled in the modern world, and nothing should be allowed to interrupt its kindly light."

The confidence of man in his ability with the aid of science to create an ordered and happy world is not, of course, something new; it has been the chief driving force in western society since the Renaissance. It has indeed suffered a severe shock; things have plainly not gone in the way that was hoped. An able thinker declared some years ago that the decisive fact in the contemporary situation was that modern man had become *uncertain* about his autonomy. But the confidence, while shaken, is far from overthrown. It is

taking fresh roots in the minds of the younger generation. It breathes in every page of Mr. Waddington's " Pelican." It is the underlying assumption of the discussions of the Brains Trust and of many other talks of the B.B.C., other than the religious broadcasts. It finds direct expression in some of the Russian plays presented on the air.

It is, in fact, just at this point that, as I have already suggested (C.N-L. No 118), our relations with Russia have a profound significance in the sphere of thought and belief. The official recognition and powerful support of science in the Soviet Union evoke a sympathetic response from scientists in other countries. The impressive achievements of the Russians in the military sphere are leading multitudes of ordinary men in this country to ask what it is in the Russian system which produces such enviable results, and they may easily get the wrong answer. Without clear insight into what is at stake and bold leadership on the part of Christians, of which there are as yet too few signs, the Western world may plunge headlong once again into the same course which by its one-sided emphasis has landed us in our present plight, instead of seeking to recover the balance in which the sole hope of salvation lies.

This I believe to be the pivotal issue in the present life of mankind. The contrast between the Christian understanding of life and the modern temper could hardly be stated more clearly, cogently and succinctly than by Professor Hodges in this week's Supplement and, in particular, in the paragraph which bears the heading " An Absolute Conflict." Very few seem as yet to be fully alive to the problem in its double significance.

The Church needs not a less, but a much greater, belief in science. Science must have free and unrestricted scope to investigate everything that its methods can probe. Not only must Christians cast their fear of it to the winds, but they must welcome it with both arms as an indispensable ally in achieving the ends which Christians must seek. There are perversions and frustrations of human personality with which medical and psychological science can deal far more successfully than religious preaching and teaching. The redemptive and pastoral mission of the Church cannot be fulfilled to-day by the parson alone; it demands the co-operation of the scientist, the doctor and the trained educator. There are evils in modern society which are destroying the bodies and souls of men that can be overcome only by means of economic and sociological knowledge.

That is one side of the truth—to be learned more deeply than most of us have yet learned it and to be held with more passionate conviction than we yet hold it. The other side is that perception of the ultimate meaning of life which has led a modern thinker to write of the world of science and a self-centred humanism, in a phrase that makes us rub our eyes, as an *unreal* world—a world of dreams. That is because he knows the real world to be the world of meeting—of personal relations. But at this point Professor Hodges must be left to take up the tale.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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FEBRUARY 11TH, 1942.

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Supplement to

C.N-L. No. 120

CHRISTIANITY IN AN AGE OF SCIENCE

DEAR OLDHAM,

Your recent Supplement to C.N-L. No. 114, "Superman or Son of God?", has touched the fundamental question of our age, and we cannot do better than think and rethink this question until it is fixed in our minds. Other questions are closely bound up with it, not least that of the relation between Christianity and the modern world. I should like to open this question from the point of view created by your Supplement.

NIETZSCHE AND MARX

Nietzsche, as you point out, took his bearings from the conviction that "God is dead." He meant, of course, that *the belief in God* is dead or dying, that no one in tune with the present age can reasonably hold that faith any more. This conviction was not peculiar to himself. He shared it with many of the liveliest minds in Europe, and even in conservative, traditionalist Britain there were voices which said or hinted the same thing. The problem of the death of God might be called the outstanding problem of the nineteenth century. Thinkers and writers, poets and philosophers everywhere resisted the conviction of His death, or yielded to it with emotions varying from despair to joy and relief. All of them saw that it would make a great difference to human life, and while some saw in it the disappearance of ancient landmarks, leaving man alone in a universe emptied of meaning, others saw rather the destruction of an instrument of tyranny, releasing new energies in mankind. Nietzsche is an outstanding example of the former type. Beginning with the loneliness of man in a meaningless world, he goes on to say that life must be given a meaning, and that this meaning can lie only in working for the coming of the superman. We ought to set beside him the figure of Marx, who represents the latter type of attitude. God, in his eyes, was never anything but a bogy invented and exploited in the interest of privilege; His death is a necessary condition of the coming of real freedom, and life finds a quite adequate meaning in the movement of history toward a classless community, in which man shall be master of the machine and through it of the whole resources of nature.

The influence of these two men is great and growing, even in Britain. Most of our people are still unattached to these or any other definite scheme of doctrine. They feel that God is dead, He has dropped out of the lives of many, He is often little more than a ghost even to those who still profess to believe in Him; but they have not taken stock of the new position and made the necessary readjustments to the altered world. When they do, Nietzsche and Marx are waiting to be their guides.

MAN THE ADVENTURER

It should be remembered that the God in whom people's belief is thus waning has had, for many centuries, a publicity service unequalled by anything in history before the Communists invented the modern technique of propaganda and the Nazis perfected it. The Church, an international body founded and upheld, according to Christian belief, by God Himself, had been preaching year by year in every parish in Europe, with government and education upholding it. Why has all this preaching been so ineffective? It has not always been so. There have been ages when Christian teaching determined the outlook of everyone, even of those who did not try to live as Christians. To-day the Church and the world have moved far apart, almost

out of earshot of one ancther, and neither really understands what the other is thinking. How has this come about?

It has come about in the first instance through a change in the attitude and temper of the world. The Christian Europe of long ago was poor, ignorant, barbarous, full of war and oppression, an infant in the arts of civilisation; but its Christianity gave it a unity of outlook and a sense of the meaning of life which bred endurance and heroism, and prepared the great explosion of energy which was the Renaissance. The Renaissance came, bringing wealth and knowledge, great achievements in art and scholarship, in science and exploration, a sense of adventure and a joy in the splendour of human life. Men took to themselves a new ideal, the ideal of Faust, the man who by deep learning has been able to make the unseen forces of nature work for him, and who by their aid carves out a career of pleasure, fame, and power. It is the ideal of a man set free from moral scruples and from duties to God or man, who sees the world before him and sets himself to exploit it. The modern world has been moulded by this Faustian spirit. Its demonic energy has brought us great gains in wealth, knowledge, and power; but it has also robbed us of the sense of community, it has blinded the mass of men to the meaning of personal relationships which you described in your Supplement to C.N-L. No. 112, "All real life is Meeting," and by cutting off our understanding of human relationships it has made God an empty word. For he who has no real meeting with his brother, whom he has seen, cannot know what is meant by God, whom he has not seen.

KNOWLEDGE AS POWER

. The change can be seen reflected in our ideas of what knowledge is. For our medieval ancestors, knowledge meant an understanding of the meaning of the world and of life. According to them, if you began by studying impartially the world in which we live, you were led inevitably to its source and meaning in God, and the knowledge of Him showed you also the meaning of human life. To put it in scholastic language, physics led up to natural theology, which in turn led on to ethics. Knowledge so conceived was closely dovetailed into life. The Renaissance and the modern world have developed a different conception, which is best expressed in Bacon's famous aphorism, " Knowledge is power." This also relates knowledge to life, but in a different way. The aim of the study of nature, on this view, is to obtain control over it, and science is justified above all by its results in the shape of machinery, medical techniques, and the like. Science conducted on these lines has had brilliant successes, until it has become in the popular mind the ideal type of knowledge. It is assumed that any branch of thought, as it comes to maturity, must " become scientific," which means that it must imitate the methods of physics. Anything which cannot be pressed into this pattern is regarded as inferior, and perhaps not real knowledge at all. The new way of studying nature does not lead inevitably to God, as the old way did, and since the existence or non-existence of God makes no difference to the laws of nature, we have largely lost interest in the question. Some think He exists, some think not, some think it is impossible to tell, and the impression grows that it does not matter. But it does matter, because the disappearance of our theology affects our ethics. If the meaning of life is not to be determined by reference to God, most people can think of little else in which to find it except the pursuit of pleasure and power, whether for the individual or for the collectivity. And that is the spoken or unspoken assumption of millions to-day.

A DEEP CLEAVAGE

In a society so minded, the Church can live on only as an anachronism, an unnecessary survival from other days. It does so live on, by the sheer inertia of habit, supported by the more conservative and timid-minded section of the people, to whom it gives the comfort of ancient rites and symbols and an escape from the stark facts of every-day life. Through their support it is still able at times to make a show of exerting influence. But it is correspondingly suspect

to those who are conscious of the real spirit of our time. To such people it appears as a voice from another and an unreal world, talking in an unintelligible language about things remote from reality. Such people can be friends with Christians as individuals, by virtue of common interests on the secular plane; but they can do nothing with our Churchmanship and our Christianity except to wonder how intelligent folk could ever go in for such things. It never occurs to them even as a possibility that these things might actually make sense. They see them only as follies or weaknesses, to be tolerated so long as they do no harm. If we try to explain to them what it is that we believe, they do not understand, or else they think they understand and are bored; for we use phrases which to them mean nothing, or convey all the wrong associations, and our ways of thought are not real to them. Masses of Christian literature pour from the press and fall dead in the same way and for the same reason. The world does not follow what we say and does not want what we offer, and the result is a cleavage greater than many Christians yet realise.

Of course all Christians know that something is wrong, even if their diagnosis goes no deeper than "empty Churches." And it is commonly recognised that science has something to do with it. Indeed, for most people the whole problem is summed up in the phrase "science and religion." Much depends, however, on how this phrase is understood. What seems to be most frequently meant is that the discoveries of "science" (by which is meant any organised branch of knowledge) are in conflict with the teachings of Christianity on points of fact, and various Christian doctrines are singled out as centres of such conflict. This is a mistake, though it will never be possible to make people believe that it is, because of the quarrels which do arise from ill-considered utterances on both sides. These quarrels are mere shadow-play, serving to conceal rather than to disclose the real conflict. The real conflict is not between the teachings of science and those of Christianity, but between the spirit and temper of our scientific age and the Christian outlook on life.

AN ABSOLUTE CONFLICT

The conflict is absolute. Modern man, or the typical man of our age, wishes to exploit the world for his own delight, whether individually or collectively, and this for him is the meaning of life. Christianity sees the meaning of life in personal relationships, and especially in relationships with God, which all other relationships reflect. Modern man therefore puts his energies into the struggle with nature and with other men who get in his way. The Christian puts his energies into the struggle with that in himself and others which unfits them for real community. The modern man takes his character and aims for granted and works to perfect his tools. The Christian is concerned to bring his character and aims constantly under judgment in the light of God. The modern man sees himself as one of a race which has fought its way up from the anthropoid and lower to a high degree of knowledge and power, and will progress indefinitely in the future. The Christian sees himself as one of a community set on the earth by God, which has broken its links with God and fallen into confusion, and which pays for technical progress in terms of moral blindness.

Between the typical Christian and the typical modern man as here described there is no common ground, though in everyday life the conflict is often less acute. It is less acute only because so many Christians fall short of their proper standard, while many who are not Christians are still fundamentally on the Christian side, since they find the meaning of life in personal relationships and not in pleasure or power. Such people, who consciously or unconsciously are allies of Christianity, are estranged from it by various causes, of which one is again the effect of science upon our ways of thinking and speaking. For the modern scientific movement has brought into play not only a new conception of the aims of life, but also a new pattern of thought and language, which contrasts strikingly and (to many people) painfully with the traditional thought and language of Christianity. The method of natural science is one of the great achievements of the human intellect. Its

brilliant successes are the result of precise observation, precise statement, patience and ingenuity in experiment, and caution in drawing conclusions. In its own line there is no discipline like it. Christianity, like all religions, moves in a sphere where precise observation and statement are hard to achieve, and experiment in the accepted sense is impossible. It expresses itself in a language which is highly figurative: large tracts of the Bible are poetry, and more again is rhetoric, and the creeds and the formulae of devotion are symbol piled on symbol. It is all very strange to the scientific man, it lacks the qualities he has been taught to seek in sound thinking, and he cannot see that it has any standards of its own. He dismisses it accordingly as "mysticism," by which he means moonshine, and (speaking himself in metaphor for once) declares that God is dead.

THE DIVISION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

This cleft between Christianity and the world is serious enough, but what if a similar cleft should open within Christianity itself? Yet has it not done so? For we Christians are living in the world which science has shaped, we are products of it, we have been educated in its ideals, we are personally involved in its work and its warfare. We are not surprised when public men refer to it as a "Christian civilisation." We believe in progress like our fellows, and think that this is the real meaning of what we read in the Bible about the Kingdom of God. We are under a constant temptation to translate our Christian symbols into terms of the modern interpretation of life and history; even God is reduced from the King of the ages to the elected President of the republic of all intelligent beings. I write strongly, but is it not so? And with God thus constitutionalised and brought up to date, the great basic emphases of Christianity, the glory of God, worship, self-abasement, sin and redemption, nature and grace, ceases to mean anything of importance, and we are left performing the motions of a religion which has gone dead on us. If this is not the case, whence come our priests who do not preach the Word, and our laity who are offended if it is preached? As if the shadow of God did not lie over them all.

It is hard to have to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, and that is what is involved in being both a Christian and a man of to-day. It is no wonder if we sometimes fail to distinguish which is which, and which has our real sympathies. Yet we cannot avoid the tension by escaping from this age. We live in the present, and in the present we have to work out our Christian lives. There is only one thing to be done. We must learn to understand the two sides of ourselves, so that the Christian in us may explain himself to the modern man in us in language which the modern man can recognise, without the Christian becoming absorbed into the modern man. Not until we have thus come to terms with ourselves shall we be able to speak as we should to the world about us, or to live out our Christianity with real conviction. Until we have done this, we shall be like that "double-minded man, unstable in all his ways," whom the Apostle warns that wisdom will not come his way (James i, 5-8), or like the famous Church in Laodicea, which was neither cold nor hot.

Yours sincerely,

H. A HODGES

Professor Hodges gained a classical scholarship at Balliol shortly after the last war and took his degree at Oxford in 1926. Two years later he became a lecturer at Reading and was appointed Professor of Philosophy there in 1934. He was in his early years a lay preacher in the Methodist Church, passed through a period of atheism and became a convinced Christian and joined the Church of England in 1927. He has devoted himself particularly to the study of the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, a German philosopher, whose chief interest was in the differences and the relationship between the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the human studies of art and literature, history, psychology, sociology and economics on the other hand.—J.H.O.

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